ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

A24'S EMPIRE OF AUTEURS

The studio is brilliant at selling small, provocative films. Now it wants to sell blockbusters, too.

By Alex Barasch

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Paradoxically, the unifying quality of A24's films is that each one feels, for better or worse, like the product of a singular mind. Illustration by Ben Wiseman

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In November of 2015, the upstart film studio A24 had a problem. Executives had acquired the writer-director Robert Eggers's stark, unsettling début, "The Witch," at the Sundance Film Festival and wanted to make it their first release to open on thousands of screens. But both Eggers and Anya Taylor-Joy, who starred as a teen-ager tempted by unholy forces, were then unknown. The story, set in the sixteen-thirties and scripted in Early Modern English, was a tough sell. To generate buzz, the company sought an unlikely partner: the Satanic Temple.

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A24's marketing team had noticed that the organization, which mounts protests in support of religious freedom and reproductive rights, had a knack for headline-grabbing stunts. They reached out to Jex Blackmore, the Temple's spokesperson at the time, who agreed to a meeting after watching "The Witch" and finding it "pretty disturbing, in a wonderful way." The studio flew Blackmore from Detroit to Manhattan to talk with executives, among them David Fenkel, one of A24's founders, who proved surprisingly receptive to ideas about the "philosophy behind satanism and witchcraft."

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The Satanic Temple publicly endorsed the movie—a first for the order—and A24 bankrolled "interactive performances" to follow preview screenings. Blackmore drew up a document enshrining their shared goal: "Create a narrative and controversy that transforms 'The Witch' into an iconic film." The satanists planned the parties; A24 minded the guest list, and canvassed butchers in search of a pig's head, for ritual use. At a post-screening event at the Jane Hotel, in New York, attendees had their foreheads marked with ash, then mingled with nearly nude performers, a theremin player, and a dominatrix. Blackmore said, "People watch a film, and then they expect to go to some Hollywood party. I wanted to really distort that experience."

The alliance elicited plenty of press, and even some actual horror: one faith-based publication asked, "Should Christians Be Afraid of 'The Witch'?" The film, which A24 acquired for $1.5 million, made upward of forty million at the box office. For Eggers, this was something of a devil's bargain: when he tried to travel to Poland to scout his next feature, the country's film commission barred him, convinced that *he* was a satanist. But the campaign—viral, edgy, and distinctly un-Hollywood—presaged A24's future success. "They support big visions," Blackmore said. "It's not often that you find people who are well resourced and well connected and are willing to trust people to be really wild with their ideas."

In the decade since "The Witch," Blackmore's praise has been echoed by filmmakers ranging from Barry Jenkins to Sofia Coppola. A24 has won twenty-one Oscars, for such films as "Moonlight," "The Brutalist," and "Everything Everywhere All at Once." Among fans, it has become synonymous with auteur-driven independent cinema; some think of it as an auteur unto itself. (Coppola told me that she knew the company had made it when she saw a man in the West Village walking his dog with an A24-branded leash.)

But the studio is in flux. After a recent infusion of venture-capital money and a $3.5-billion valuation, its production budgets and commercial ambitions have grown. It now has a music label and an Off Broadway theatre, and has just created a division, A24 Labs, to explore A.I. tools. Josh and Benny Safdie, who broke out with the two-million-dollar A24 drama "Good Time," are each releasing around seventy-million-dollar projects with the studio later this year—one starring Timothée Chalamet, the other starring Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson. Alex Garland, a writer-director who first worked with A24 on "Ex Machina," is developing an adaptation of the best-selling video game Elden Ring.

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In Garland's view, A24 is still far from a Hollywood-style studio. "I've been working in film for over twenty-five years, and I've crossed a pre-A24 and a post-A24 era," he told me. When he was starting out in the industry, in the late nineties, he said, "the deal was you could have ideas, you could have ethical complexity, you could have things that were confronting to the viewer in one way or another, but you needed to smuggle them into the film." At A24, he'd found, "I don't have to smuggle ideas in. In fact, the ideas are things that we will freely discuss and try to exploit."

As the company grows, it's betting that such provocations can be a selling point. If a movie is incendiary, the marketing department tends to lean in. "They think like Andy Warhol a little bit. Like, what's relevant right now?" Halina Reijn, who directed "Babygirl," in which Nicole Kidman has an illicit dom-sub affair, said of A24. "They also teach you to think like that as a filmmaker." She, like Garland, has been encouraged to pursue topical material that sparks debate. "You might say, 'I just want to go to Cannes!' But they say, 'No—you want to be part of *culture*.' "

A24 was rebellious from the start. It was created in New York in 2012, when indie cinema was in the doldrums. "Every company at that time was some derivation of Miramax, or a response to Miramax," an early employee told me. "And those companies had started to age with those buyers." In the eighties, Miramax had made independent film a mainstream phenomenon through aggressive marketing tactics, distributing such breakthroughs as Steven Soderbergh's "sex, lies, and videotape." But, by the two-thousands, its output had ossified into kitschy Oscar bait, like "Cold Mountain." A24's three young founders—David Fenkel, Daniel Katz, and John Hodges—aspired to match Miramax's heyday. They wanted to release art-house fare for their own generation—and believed that, by keeping costs low and relying on digital-first promotion, they could make money doing it.

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Katz secured fourteen million dollars from the Wall Street firm Guggenheim Partners, and the trio assembled a team. Among their first recruits was a twenty-five-year-old named Noah Sacco, who is now A24's head of film. On a drizzly May morning, I met him for breakfast in Manhattan. At thirty-eight, he has a boyish demeanor, a slender build, and a shock of wavy, silver-streaked hair. Wearing a short-sleeved black shirt and a thin gold chain, he immediately ordered coffee and apologized for being sleep-deprived. "I used to sleep like a toddler, and then, in the middle of the pandemic, it just fell through my fingers," he said. "The toothpaste was out of the tube!"

Sacco is warm, excitable, and self-deprecating. Unlike most studio executives—whom artists often resent for undermining their visions with obtuse notes—he's also beloved by filmmakers. Celine Song, the writer and director of "Past Lives" and "Materialists," calls Sacco her "guardian angel." She told me, "Noah will always understand the movie I'm making," adding that she particularly trusts his storytelling instincts: "If I've cut a scene and one night I'm in doubt about it, I call him and say, 'Hey, did you miss that scene?' " Sacco reacts to such praise with palpable embarrassment. A24 executives avoid attention, and have made a business practice of cultivating mystique. Even the studio's name, borrowed from an Italian motorway, is cryptic by design: a symbol onto which fans can project their own meanings

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that, like Tarantino before him, he got a job at a video store. Before joining A24, he'd spent two years at the Weinstein Company, and felt disillusioned with the industry. Energized by the startup's more collaborative ethos, and by its plan to target younger cinephiles, he took the leap, despite a pay cut. To land the position, Sacco lied about having acquisitions experience; he'd never even attended a film festival. His first was Toronto, in 2012, where, he recalled, "I was running around with a backpack, doing three different jobs."

"Can't a woman read aloud in a bar without being bothered?"

Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Open cartoon gallery

A24's first two acquisitions fizzled, but its third, Harmony Korine's "Spring Breakers," was a hit. Though the trailers promised skimpily clad college girls committing petty theft, the movie takes a dark, surreal turn, including a violent crime spree scored to Britney Spears. Such meme-worthy sequences and a polarizing third-act twist—one character gets machine-gunned to death—became signature A24 flourishes. The studio bypassed TV ads in favor of an online campaign, which went viral; during awards season, it eschewed pompous "For Your Consideration" rhetoric in favor of an appeal to "CONSIDER THIS SH*T." Another early release, Sofia Coppola's "The Bling Ring," now seems like a harbinger. The film follows a group of young underdogs using internet savvy and pop-cultural awareness to steal from the Hollywood élite—methods not unlike A24's own. Katz was on vacation in Hawaii when he received furious calls from Harvey Weinstein, who'd wanted the title himself.

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A24 works almost exclusively with writer-directors like Coppola. Paradoxically, the unifying quality of its films is that each one feels, for better or worse, like the product of a singular mind. Many of the studio's débuts mine the lives of their creators; Greta Gerwig prepped the cast of "Lady Bird" by sharing her high-school yearbooks. It's also known for releasing genre films, each of which has a distinct aesthetic sensibility: in "Midsommar," Ari Aster wrung pathos from the image of a bad boyfriend being set aflame while stuffed inside the skin of a bear. Though A24's movies vary in tone and substance, its embrace of the specific and the strange convinced fans that, in an era dominated by formulaic franchises, the studio promised something different.

Zoe Beyer, A24's creative director, started out as the voice of its freewheeling social-media feeds. She now introduces its podcast, which borrows the format of *Interview* magazine: two artists, no intermediary. When she realized how intensely moviegoers felt about A24—acolytes were tattooing its logo on their bodies—she and a colleague proposed making branded merchandise. A test run of sweatshirts emblazoned with "A TWENTY-FOUR," to clarify the pronunciation, sold out, confirming a hunger for more. Today, for a monthly fee, roughly a hundred thousand "AAA24 members" get first dibs on A24 products, free film tickets, and access to special events, which attendees inevitably post about online. The program is far from a profit center, but it generates highly effective advertising. An executive called the members "evangelicals for the movies."

A24's founding employees have largely stuck around, and partnerships with talent tend to be lasting, too: when the company backs a movie or a series—it also has a TV division—the implicit intent is to keep working with the creator. Executives are in constant conversation with their roster, and pride themselves on the intimacy of the operation. Decisions on new filmmakers are made democratically by a core group: Katz, Fenkel, Sacco, and Nicolette Aizenberg, the head of distribution. (Aizenberg is another veteran: in 2012, she and Sacco celebrated their first film festival together with tequila shots.) Katz, who has dark hair and narrow features, leads by asking questions; he responds to assessments he approves of with an emphatic "Correct!" Fenkel, taller and broader, is affably punctilious. He's transparent in a business of bullshitters.

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Discussions about green-lighting a project, Sacco told me, have "a creative component" and "an economic component." When introducing prospects that his team is eager to cultivate, he offers the group a précis. The moment a deal is made, staffers in the marketing division read the script and begin strategizing. But the process of shaping and releasing a movie varies from director to director. "It's personality-driven," Sacco said. He considers it essential to get to know artists as individuals. (This goes beyond mere meetings—he recently attended a Charli XCX concert with Aster and Reijn.) Sacco explained, "If you spend time with these people and really understand why this feels important to them, then you understand the DNA of the movie better. If you understand the DNA of the movie better, you understand how to bring it into the world."

In a landscape crowded by reboots and sequels, A24 executives pursue the unfamiliar. "Taste has to evolve with the times," Sacco said. "We're all collectively most interested in what is absent in culture—and what is absent is always changing." He noted, "When 'Spring Breakers' came out, it felt new. In the wake of that movie, things with neon colors and that sort of attitude instantly felt a little borrowed, a little late." In A24's early years, it often picked up films that bigger companies had shied away from. Jonathan Glazer's captivatingly hypnotic, half-improvised "Under the Skin," which stars Scarlett Johansson as an alien who hunts lonely human men, had no other offers for a U.S. theatrical release; Garland's wily "Ex Machina," about an erratic tech billionaire who summons an employee to perform the Turing test on a beautiful android, had been dropped by its distributor.